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PALLIATIVE AND PREJUDICED JUDGMENTS CONDEMNED

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN

THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH,

RICHMOND, VA., JUNE 1, 1865,

*The Day appointed by the President of the United States for Humiliation
and Mourning on Account of the Assassination of President Lincoln,*

TOGETHER WITH

AN EXTRACT FROM A SERMON,

*Preached on Sunday, April 23rd, 1865, upon the Assassination of President
Lincoln.*

BY J. HANSING BURROWS, D. D.

RICHMOND, VA.:
OFFICE COMMERCIAL BULLETIN.
1865.

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PALLIATIVE AND PREJUDICED JUDGMENTS CONDEMNED.

A DISCOURSE

Delivered in the First Baptist Church, Richmond, Va., June 1, 1865, the Day appointed by the President of the United States, for "Humiliation and Mourning" on Account of the Assassination of President Lincoln

BY J. L. BURROWS, D. D.

He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are an abomination to the Lord.—Prov. xvii, 15.

Essential and eternal are the distinctions between right and wrong. No change of circumstances, no considerations of policy or expediency, can transmute sin into holiness, or obedience into transgression. Whatever is in itself wrong, is always wrong; whatever is in itself right, is forever right. Men often call good evil, and evil good. God abhors this confounding of antagonistic elements, and "he that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are an abomination to the Lord."

From motives of interest or expediency men often justify the wicked and their crimes. Excuses and apologies are often made for deeds which in their own true character are condemned by every enlightened conscience and by the law of God. Falsehood and fraud and robbery and murder are palliated and justified by men whose selfish purposes or passions are gratified by their perpetration. Vices and crimes, odious in themselves and injurious to society, are justified under the plea of necessity or policy. The infamous proverb, "the end sanctifies the means," is, in substance, often repeated and practically illustrated. Many smooth over the deformed features of wicked acts by euphemisms. In the language of the day, fraud is called shrewdness—blasphemy, free speech—falsehood, invention—perjury, equivocation, and robbery, appropriation.

The blackest crimes of the horrible war through which we have just passed, have found and yet find justification from some who claim to be personally upright and even pious. Robbery and arson and massacre and rape; cruelty to prisoners and faithlessness to solemn oaths; the spoiling of unarmed citizens and defenceless women; the wanton destruction of household goods and agricultural implements, of growing crops and stored grain; the whole black catalogue of outrages perpetrated by maddened armies, which authority and discipline are often too weak to restrain, and which are condemned alike by the law of nations and the law of God—we sometimes hear palliated and defended. This is to justify the wicked, and by whomsoever and on whatever side such justification is an abomination to God.

This extenuation of wickedness is hateful to God: 1st. Because it confounds the distinctions between holiness and sin. 2d. Because it assumes another law than His will for the government of human conduct. 3d. Because it debases and depraves the moral sense. 4th. Because it demoralizes and inflicts incalculable mischiefs upon society.

God hates this justifying of wickedness, and how can we speak lightly, laughingly or apologetically of that which is so strongly antagonistic to the whole scope and spirit of His Holy law!

We are called upon to-day, by the President of the United States, to assemble in our churches, and give expression to our condemnation and grief, for the terrible crime which has shocked the nation, and hurled the chief of a great people from his high position by an assassin blow. We respond to the invitation, join the nation in its mourning, record our detestation of the crime, and our sympathy with those who suffer. We have no feelings but those of horror and indignation and grief in contemplating this deed of infamy.

Whatever may have been the personal character of President Lincoln, whatever may have been our views of the political doctrines and policy he represented, we have but one voice and one heart, of profound and abhorrent condemnation of the brutal criminality of those, whoever they may be, who are directly or remotely implicated in the atrocious deed. And this I am glad to know, for the honor of humanity and Christianity, is the universal voice of the people of this city and State.

It is obviously not becoming in us to press forward as special eulogists of Mr. Lincoln. Those who know him personally may more appropriately speak of his virtues and excellencies. We of the South have known him mainly as the representative man, whose name and position embodied the political principles that were involved in the war. To these principles we have been arrayed in known antagonism during the last four years. We might, therefore, be well chargeable with hypocrisy, for which we should be scorned by all honest men, with base truckling for present favor, if, against all the views and sentiments we have so plainly and energetically expressed, we should now suddenly in the spirit of sycophancy and slavishness, pretend to admire and approve the policy and aims of which the late President was the representative.

We accept the settlement of these principles by the arbitration of war and by the providence of God; we submit to the government which has been established, as the "powers that be that are ordained of God;" we mean to be what we have sworn to be, faithful and loyal subjects of that government, to maintain and uphold its authority and influence; we may even believe that, under the providence and sovereignty of God, the best results, from the whole struggle for the whole country, all things considered, have been attained—that it may prove best that the system of slavery should end, and, like the Mosaic Dispensation, and the grand useful old feudal system, give place to further developments of progressive civilization; we may even accept a centralized nationality, as swallowing up the claims of State sovereignty; and yet accepting and believing all this, modesty and consistency might well forbid that we should thrust ourselves into prominence as the eulogists and admirers of the late President. We were honest in our views and in our action during the fearful struggle; we thought we were right when we sympathized with and aided our State and section. And we cannot yield all manliness, and self-respect, and consis-

teney, and conscience, by pretending an approval and admiration of doctrines and policy to which we have been honestly opposed.

But that we should justify his assassination, or express or feel any emotion but horror and detestation and grief for such a crime—that be far from us Christians and honest men.

We may further lament on our own account the sudden death of Mr. Lincoln. We have reason to do so. We believe he was disposed to be generous and liberal in his measures for the reconstruction of the government. No harsh or vengeful or malignant thoughts toward our people seemed to find place in his heart, in arranging for the settlement of the great controversy. He would, I doubt not, as leniently and benevolently as possible, have exerted his great influence and authority. His death is, therefore, a calamity to us for which we mourn.

Far from justifying it, then, we condemn and mourn it, as a crime in itself—as a calamity to the nation—as a special misfortune and wrong toward ourselves.

Inscrutable are the providences of God! fathomless to human ken are His purposes! But Jehovah reigns. He has permitted this crime to be committed. His wisdom and might will overrule it to the furtherance of His own beneficent designs, in the progress and well-being of humanity, in the enlargement and purity of that kingdom of Jesus for which the world itself exists, and in the glory of His own reign and name.

May God comfort those who are stricken most nearly and severely by this blow, and afford to them the consolations and guidance of His grace.

II. To condemn the just or the innocent is equally an abomination to the Lord.

To treat as criminal one who asserts his innocence, and against whom no crime has been proven, under the impulses of prejudice or passion or fanaticism; to condemn and punish such as though they were confessed and convicted offenders, is a crime against humanity and a sin against God. Indeed, there may seem something benevolent and humane in the reluctance with which kind-hearted men admit the guilt and censure the offences of the erring. It is a vice that “leans to virtue’s side.” It may have its foundation in a “charity that thinketh no evil.” It may be a generous unwillingness to believe in the utter and entire depravity of the human soul. A weakness it may be, a sin it may become; but it is a weakness and sin inclining toward benevolence.

But condemning the innocent is a vice that bears toward malignity. It evinces a readiness, an eagerness, to believe evil concerning another. It has its origin in evil surmisings, suspicions, jealousies and cruelty. It is ready to believe the worst; to look upon the blackest side of human conduct. Its basis is a malevolent spirit, and, therefore, God abhors it. It hounded the martyrs to the dungeon, the scaffold and the stake. It dragged the Son of God to Calvary, and murdered him there.

In relation to the lamentable event which this day has been appointed to commemorate and to mourn, we have a sad illustration of this spirit. Notwithstanding their most earnest and indignant protest, notwithstanding asseverations the most solemn of their innocence of counselling, countenancing, or approving this black crime, the people of these Southern States, as a whole, are pertinaciously and fiercely

condemned and denounced as responsible and guilty of the vile deed. That a fierce and infuriate soldiery, that a fuming and conscienceless political press, should, in the hot wrath of the hour, turbulently utter such wholesale charges, is not wonderful nor unusual. With these we have nothing to say, on this solemn day, and in this consecrated house, for it is not here our province to speak of the military or political aspects of such questions. But, that the so-called religious press, that the sermons of professed ministers of Christ's gospel of truth and love, theoretically supposed to cherish some measure of the temper of Christian charity and truthfulness; to evince, at least, some remote imitations of the spirit of Christ, should emulate and exaggerate the violence and virulence of military bulletins and political philippics—this is a dishonor to religion, a stain upon the Christianity of this century. Against the palpable injustice and wrong of such baseless denunciations, it is the right, it is the duty, of Christian ministers and churches to protest in the name of Jesus and Christianity.

A few extracts from these misnamed religious papers are necessary in order to show, that we are guilty of no unfairness or exaggeration in charging them with that unjust condemnation which is an abomination to the Lord.

The *Examiner and Chronicle*, of New York, April 20th, says: "The President of the Republic has fallen, the selected victim of rebel assassination, solely because he has been the Republic's most dauntless champion, and most watchful guardian. Whatever may be said to the contrary, men will everywhere believe, that this foul and fiendish conspiracy, in which two vulgar assassins have been the actors, is the result of rebel machinations at a distance. In striking him down, by their representative assassin, they have destroyed their chief hope of a lenient and indulgent pacification. They may exult in the damning deed, but, by his death, they will surely have to bear the retribution of a justice, which, had he lived, might have been tempered with a greater mercy.

"The crime of the miscreant murderer now seems to stand forth as the type of the whole rebellion, and in the agony of our calamity it appears like a mockery of justice to hunt down his worthless life, and leave unpunished the traitors of whose plottings he was one of the humblest executors."

The same paper, of May 4th, thus discourses: "Assassination was organized into a regular plot, and a band of authorized agents was formed for its accomplishment. It has always been encouraged by leading secessionists and sanctioned by public opinion in the rebel States. And now the stain of the long intended deed will rest upon them forever. It was prompted by their inspiration and was perpetrated in their service, and however earnestly or severely it may now be repudiated or condemned, it by no means follows that it would not have been accepted and approved, had it been in season to do them anything but unspeakable harm. In its dark and dire atrocity the world will see reflected only the real spirit of this rebellion. It has betrayed itself at last to the dismay and confusion of all its sympathizers and applauders in every land."

The *Independent*, of April 27th, says: "The vial of retributive wrath is too large and full to be squandered upon the single head of a trembling wretch who now skulks from the eye of the world. Let the great punishment fall upon the first, the chief, the arch criminal in this crime of crimes. The murderer of the President is SLAVERY." "Let

the American people when they have buried the corpse which they now watch, arise from their sackcloth and ashes, to forget amnesty and to execute judgment."

A correspondent of the same paper—a woman, too, says: "From the first moment I heard of the murder I believed the plan was known and approved at Richmond, if not connected there. Meanness and brute violence are the natural outgrowth of slavery. Men educated under such a system become familiar with assassination." Jefferson Davis is called the "the prompter in the tragedy of the assassination."

The *Watchman and Reflector*, of Boston, thus discourses: "The barbarism of slavery has culminated in an atrocious crime, and the nation is thrilled with horror. It was fitting that an institution of the dark ages, should select the method of the dark ages, for doing its accursed work. To the black catalogue of its sins in treason, and theft, and perjury, and murder, and starvation of prisoners, is now added the assassination of the President."

The *Christian Era*, of the same city, May 11th, says:

"If it (The Missionary Union) shall now hasten to invite back the guilty clergy of the South, *who, from the beginning, have had murder and treason in their hearts*, it may fear that it will be swept away before the indignation of an aroused and vigilant people."

But I will not weary you with further quotations of this character. What do they mean? If anything, they mean that the Southern people, as a body, are responsible for the murder of President Lincoln, and should be, without mercy, punished for it. They mean that you and I, my brethren, should be stigmatized and abhorred as assassins. Without a tittle of evidence; against our solemn pleas of "Not Guilty," we are condemned and judged as murderers. If the text from which I preach is inspired truth, then the spirit that develops itself in such charges "is an abomination to the Lord." To His righteous judgment we commit the retribution.

"Slavery murdered President Lincoln!" And yet not a slaveholder is shown to have had the slightest participation in the crime.

"The Confederacy assassinated the President!" And yet with one insignificant exception, not a man ever connected with the Confederate army or Government, is shown to have had any knowledge of the plot. No resident of any Confederate State has even been brought to trial on suspicion of complicity with this crime. Even if there were slaveholders, or Confederate soldiers or officials, proven to have participated in, or connived at this bloody deed, it would be unjust to confound the innocent with the guilty. How much more so when the most vigilant scrutiny can not detect a man or woman who ever had a home in a Southern State, to summon before the tribunal of justice and answer to the charge.

Would it not be equally logical and just to say, "Because these detected assassins lived in Washington or Maryland, therefore, we hold the people of Washington and Maryland responsible for the crime: Because some of them were connected with the theatre, therefore we regard all actors as involved in the guilt of murder: Because most of them are in the communion of the Roman Catholic church, therefore we hold that church, with its Bishops and Cardinals and Pope, responsible for the assassination. The doctrines and policy of Popery train and arm assassins."

Honest and thinking men would be shocked at such astounding in-

ferences from the facts. And yet they are as fair and logical as the deductions which these ministers of the gospel, these guides of the religious sentiments of the people, these expositors of ethics and guardians of the morals of the churches, have flung out in their patriotic phrenzy against the people of the South.

I would not transcend the limits of allowed liberty of speech, I would not awaken emotions that are inconsistent with the solemnities of the day, but surely it may be permitted us, while we lament the calamity that has bowed a nation in mourning, to repel the charge uttered from many a religious paper and pulpit, that we are involved in the guilt that has wrought this calamity and awakened this mourning.

And now, my brethren, in concluding this discourse, let me exhort you to guard your spirits against the indulgence of malign emotions, and your conversation against bitter and irascible words. A modest, earnest and firm defence against charges which impeach your integrity and conscientiousness, is required of you by self-respect and truth. But to return railing for railing, to cherish a contentious or malevolent spirit, is useless, mischievous, an offence to God, and destructive of the sweet and peaceful spirit of piety. What seems to you so unlovely, so repugnant to the temper of the gospel, so contrary to the meek and forbearing spirit of Jesus, in others, do not allow yourself to copy. It would be as hateful in you as it is in those who so unjustly and malevolently condemn and denounce you. Oh! my brethren, it is hard to bear injustice meekly, to endure unfounded and unreasonable reproaches, humbly and unresistingly, and yet this is the spirit of which our Lord set us a glorious example, and which He requires of His disciples: "I say unto you resist not evil." "Overcome evil with good."

It is with us a little matter to be judged with man's judgment. The very acts and principles for which we are censured and villified by men, may be approved and justified by God. What are called so flippantly rebellion and treason against human governments, may be stigmatized as "the worst of crimes" by statesmen and politicians, whose standard of judging is simply political; but God's decisions of right and wrong are measured by no such standards. He adjudges guilt or innocence according to the sanctions of that moral law, the complete summary of which He has given us in the Ten Commandments, and in which mere political offences are not included. These do not involve the guilt for which the soul is condemned at His tribunal. Among the noblest and purest men, morally, the world has ever seen, have been many who have been denounced, condemned and executed for treason and rebellion, and yet from the scaffold their pure spirits, justified through the righteousness of Christ, have ascended to receive the smiling approval and blessing of their infinite Judge and Father. Only let us maintain our integrity in His sight, seek purity of heart and the self-acquittal of our own consciences, through the purifying blood of Christ's atonement, walk obediently along the path of His commandments, and the censure and wrath of men can work us but little and but temporary harm. Let us be faithful in our duties as citizens, and pious in our spirit as Christians, seeking in all our relations to our fellow men, "the things that make for peace, and things whereby one may edify another," and we may hope for the dawn of that happy day, when "the envy also of Ephraim shall depart, and the adversaries of Judah shall be cut off. Ephraim shall not envy Judah, and Judah shall not vex Ephraim. And there shall be a highway for the remnant of the people, which shall be left like as it was to Israel in the day when he came up out of the land of Egypt."

EXTRACT FROM A SERMON

PREACHED AT

THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH,

Sunday, April 23rd, 1865,

Upon the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States

[From the Richmond Times.]

The text on the occasion was taken from the 24th chapter of Job, portion of the 22d verse: "*No man is sure of life.*"

The exordium consisted in a dissertation upon the uncertainty of life, and from these general reflections, the orator proceeded to remark that:

We have found a most melancholy and startling illustration in the terrible event which, since last we met, has shocked and thrilled the hearts of the people of this country: the horrible and execrable assassination of the President of the United States. If any man, because of high position and influence; because of uncompleted plans and purposes, upon which the interests and destinies of a great nation were suspended; because of the hopes and yearnings of millions of people that were turned in agony of solicitude toward his decisions and measures; might seem, for a season, assured of continued life, under the guardianship of a watchful Providence, that man would seem to our wisdom to have been Abraham Lincoln. No weightier or more momentous political interests were ever concentrated in one man's life since this world began than were concentrated in his life. The North were listening for his counsels with confidence, and the South with glimmerings of hope. Anticipations of the termination of a war as disastrous and bloody as any which ever cursed our globe, began to be indulged. And, just at this point of suspense and expectation, Death thrust his skeleton form upon the scene, and for the time all seems whirled back into chaos and night. * * * * *

The method of President Lincoln's death excites our horror and indignation. It was an atrocious and brutal assassination, for which there can be not only no excuse, but no possible palliation, unless the perpetrator were an irresponsible lunatic. Only a desperate villain could premeditate such a crime, and only reckless depravity could approve or justify it. The slaughter by armed men of each other on the battle-field is a spectacle, saddening enough to the Christian heart, which only a stern necessity can at all justify, and which it is very difficult to reconcile with the spirit of the gospel. War, in its most allowable phases, is of doubtful morality, a still lingering relic of depraved barbarism. Yet the soldier may in some sense be regarded as an official of the government, like the constable or sheriff, acting under the authority of law. But when, without law, without the authority of government, from motives of private vengeance or avarice, or by constituting himself an avenger of what he may deem public wrongs,

one slays an unarmed foe, he becomes simply a *vulgar and execrable assassin, who should be hunted down without mercy, and executed by the officers of the law without pity.* I am glad to feel that I speak the sentiments of the Southern people, when I characterize this crime in terms of unmeasured abhorrence and disgust. With whatever other crimes the citizens of the Southern States may be chargeable, none can assert with truth that private, skulking assassination is encouraged or excused by the popular sentiment or spirit. Even the mis-called "laws of honor," which permit a man to meet in mortal conflict a personal foe—and which is, in itself, a barbarism, for which there should be in this day no apologists nor defenders—even this savage code denounces as a criminal and a coward, the man who takes an unfair advantage, and seeks the life of an adversary, without an equal and open exposure of his own life. There is no intelligent or cultivated Southern man, there is no good or generous heart anywhere, that does not regard with burning indignation and scorn, a professional crime like this. There is no sympathy with the cowardly bravo, who carries a concealed stiletto, and lies in wait for his unarmed and unconscious victim.

And if the assassination of the humblest citizen is thus to be regarded with horror and detestation, how much more when the Chief Magistrate of a great nation is recklessly slaughtered. It may be true that his life is no more precious to himself than that of the lowliest. But both by the laws of our nature, and by the requirements of God's word, there is demanded for the rulers of a people a respect and veneration which men in private stations may not claim. Their lives are more sacred, because they belong not merely to themselves, but to the nation. The murder of one in such a position is, therefore, a far blacker crime than ordinary homicide. It is an assault upon the honor and dignity of a nation. It is a blow which strikes the hearts of millions. It is an outrage upon the rights, and interests, and affections of a whole people. Committed by a subject of the government, of which the victim is the representative and head, *as in this case*, it associates with it all that is foul in treason with all that is base and revolting in murder. He is, therefore, no common criminal whose hands have perpetrated this bloody deed. When David, after suffering great personal wrong, found Saul, his King, in his power, he dared not avenge himself, but in the spirit of allegiance and piety, exclaimed: "The Lord forbid that I should stretch forth my hand against the Lord's anointed!"

It has been said that the South should be held responsible for the assassination of President Lincoln, and that severer measures should be adopted toward the people because of this crime. This would be visiting upon the innocent the sins of the guilty. This would be, in its turn, an injustice and a crime. To hold a whole people responsible for an outrage which they not only disown, but deplore and abhor, might be the first impulse of blind and phrenzied passion, but cannot become a principle of action with fair-minded and magnanimous men. Let the guilty suffer. Let those who were accessory to a deed so infernal, either in its conception or execution, meet the just penalty of the law, but in the name of justice, and fairness, and humanity, let not maddened passion seek for victims among those who are as guiltless of such a crime as the closest personal friends of the murdered President. In the name of the South, I protest, with all the earnestness of which my nature is capable, against being involved in the remotest

degree in an atrocity from which my whole soul revolts, and which can awaken no utterance of more honest and indignant condemnation in any section of the country than in these Southern States.

In the present aspect of political affairs, the bitterest enemy of the South could not have devised a deeper injury, a direr mischief to the people than the murder of President Lincoln. The malignity of a demon could not have concocted a more effective scheme for damaging the South than this. Just at the point of time when our principal army had surrendered; when organized resistance was here no longer possible; when a policy of conciliation looking to a general amnesty and a resumption of peaceful relations was announced as the purpose of the President of the United States, as if deliberately intended to thwart this benevolent policy; to overthrow these plans of peace; to kindle into a fiercer flame the embers of suspicion and jealousy, and rancor, this assassin hurls his bloody dagger between the approaching parties, that they may recoil in horror from their mutual advances. If the deed was a calamity to the North, it was a more harmful calamity to the South. It could prove no possible benefit, and might prove a most direful mischief. Thus not only morally, but politically, *it was a stupendous crime against the South.* In this aspect of the case, we have even more reason to mourn over this murder than the people of the North. Its tendencies are to inflict a deeper injury upon us than even upon them. May God in His providences overrule these reactionary tendencies, and, despite this diabolical ingenuity, carry forward His own gracious purposes of mercy and peace.

If this murderer of President Lincoln had ever been identified in any way with our Government or armies; if he had been even a citizen of any Southern State, there might have been a little more show of reason in charging the South with sympathy or participation in the crime. Even in such a case it would be unjust to hold the many accountable for the outrage of a few; to associate the innocent with the guilty in indiscriminate hostility and violence. In every community there are desperate and brutal men, for whose villainies none but themselves can righteously be held responsible. But the perpetrator of this nefarious deed was a citizen of a State never in formal political union with the Confederacy of the South. Following his disreputable and immoral calling as an actor, he is said to have been in Richmond when the war commenced, and to have fled from it when the probability arose that military service might be required of him, and has never been connected in any way with the Southern government or army. If connected, as asserted, with a clique known as the "Knights of the Golden Circle," this is affirmed to be an association which originated in the North, and numbered but few adherents in the Southern States. *Living an immoral and degraded man in the city of Baltimore, associated with revelling drunkards and harlots, and play actors, utterly out of the pale of respectable society, without the knowledge or sympathy, or co-operation, so far as it appears, of any Southern official, soldier or gentleman, he, either alone or in alliance with a few wretches of the same low class, projected this deed of cruel infamy.* The facts, so far as developed, warrant no other theory than this.

And for the acts of such a man, with such associates as he could influence, shall the people of ten States, or any one State, be held accountable? Shall the policy of a great nation be influenced by the eccentric or extraordinary crime of one man, who must be either an irresponsible madman, a raving knave, or an arrant fool? or by the

outrages of a secret band of such men plotting in midnight cabal, like vulgar outlaws and robbers, their deeds of violence and crime? A strong nation will hunt them down and extirpate them, as shepherds do the wolves that break into their folds. *But shepherds do not wreak their vengeance upon the scattered and worried flocks, from suspicion that they may have been in league with the wolves and encouraged or participated in their ravage!*

The reverend doctor explained that he ventured to speak thus fully and earnestly upon this theme, because he deemed it fitting that some voice from the South should be heard in its name, manfully repudiating any sympathy with, or approval of, such a crime as has shocked the world, and earnestly protesting against being held responsible, in any degree, for outrages which every good and honest man must mourn and detest.

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